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SIPDIS
TELEGRAM

January 28, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 447 - ROUTINE)
TAGS: OEXC, SCUL, KPAO
Captions: None
Subject: COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES: U.S. AND UAE STUDENTS
DISCUSS CONFLICT, CAMELS, AND COUSINS.
Ref: None

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 00447

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8104
INFO RUEHZM/GCC COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000447

SIPDIS

FOR ECA; NEA/PPD (JDAVIES, CBOURGEOIS, WMOONEY, ACASPER,
DMACINNES); NEA/ARP (LMALENAS)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO OEXC SCUL TC
SUBJECT: COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES: U.S. AND UAE
STUDENTS DISCUSS CONFLICT, CAMELS, AND COUSINS.

¶1. SUMMARY: ON JANUARY 7, 2003, APAO ATTENDED A
DIGITAL VIDEO CONFERENCE BETWEEN EMIRATI WOMEN FROM
ZAYED UNIVERSITY AND STUDENTS OF A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL
IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK. AS PART OF A COMMUNICATIONS
COURSE PROJECT, THE EMIRATI STUDENTS DESIGNED A SURVEY
AND A SERIES OF DVCS TO BRIDGE A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL
GAP BETWEEN U.S. AND UAE STUDENTS. THE DISCUSSION
RANGED FROM TERRORISM, IRAQ, AND "WHY DO THEY HATE US?"
TO SINGERS, CAMELS, AND MARRIAGE. OVERALL, ONE THING IS
VERY CLEAR: WHILE CRITICAL OF USG POLICIES, YOUNG
EMIRATI WOMEN SPEND A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF THEIR LIVES
SURFING AMERICAN WEBSITES, WATCHING AMERICAN MOVIES,

LISTENING TO AMERICAN MUSIC, AND WEARING POPULAR
AMERICAN CLOTHES, ALBEIT UNDER THEIR ABAYAS AND SHAYLAS.
END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) A COMMUNICATIONS COURSE AT THE ABU DHABI
CAMPUS OF ZAYED UNIVERSITY (ZU), AN ELITE UNIVERSITY FOR
EMIRATI WOMEN, DEVELOPED A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO
PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE UAE, ARABIC CULTURE, AND
ISLAM TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NEW YORK. THE CLASS
LAUNCHED THE PROJECT BY CONDUCTING A SURVEY OF CATHOLIC
HIGH SCHOOLS IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK, FOCUSING ON
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST. THE AMERICAN
STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY INCLUDED:

--94 PERCENT BELIEVE THE UAE IS A DANGEROUS PLACE TO
LIVE; 50 PERCENT BELIEVE ISLAM IS A RELIGION THAT
ENCOURAGES TERRORISM; 70 PERCENT BELIEVE UAE WOMEN COVER
THEMSELVES BECAUSE ARAB SOCIETY IS NOT MODERN; NONE OF
THE STUDENTS BELIEVED THE UAE HAS MODERN CITIES WITH
HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS; 88 PERCENT THINK THE UAE DOESN'T
HAVE SHOPPING MALLS; AND 44 PERCENT BELIEVE EMIRATIS
STILL USE CAMELS TO GET TO WORK AND SCHOOL EVERY DAY.

13. THE EMIRATI STUDENTS THEN DEVELOPED A COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY TO DISCUSS WITH THE STUDENTS AT THE CHRISTIAN
BROTHERS ACADEMY. THE EMIRATI STUDENTS FOCUSED ON THE
AMERICAN STUDENTS' INACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF ARAB
CULTURE, ISLAM, AND THE UAE. BOTH STUDENTS QUESTIONS
RANGED FROM "WHY DO THEY HATE US," TO CULTURAL AND
RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, ABORTION, DATING AND MARRIAGE,
MUSICIANS, AND LIFE IN THE U.S. AND UAE. WHILE
DEMOSTRATING LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE UAE OR THE MIDDLE
EAST, THE AMERICAN STUDENTS EMPHASIZED AMERICANS
GENERALLY HOLD NO AGGRESSIONS OR PREJUDICES AGAINST ANY
PEOPLE BASED SOLELY ON ETHNICITY OR RELIGION, ESPECIALLY
ARABS AND MUSLIMS. CONVERSELY, THE EMIRATI STUDENTS
EXPRESSED THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND CONTINUED INTEREST IN
AMERICAN POP CULTURE AND INTERNET SITES BUT OPPOSITION
TO U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. QUESTIONS INCLUDED:

--(EMIRATIS) Q: DO YOU THINK WE OR OTHER ARABS ARE
TERRORISTS. (AMERICANS) A: NO.

--(EMIRATIS) Q: DO ANY OF YOU WANT TO TRAVEL TO THE UAE
OR THE MIDDLE EAST? (AMERICANS - MAJORITY) A: NO.
IT'S TOO DANGEROUS. (A FEW REPLIED WITH A "YES.")

--(EMIRATIS) Q: DO YOU SUPPORT A WAR AGAINST IRAQ?
(AMERICANS) A: YES AND NO. (COMMENT: FOUR OF THE
AMERICAN STUDENTS LAUNCHED INTO A HEATED DEBATE ABOUT A
WAR IN IRAQ, A FEW OPPOSING ANY ATTACK. THE EMIRATI
STUDENTS SEEMED SURPRISED BY THIS. END COMMENT.)

--(AMERICANS) Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT A WAR AGAINST
IRAQ? (EMIRATIS) A: WE DO NOT LIKE SADDAM AT ALL. WE
THINK HE SHOULD BE REMOVED AND WOULD BE HAPPY TO SEE HIM
GO. WE OPPOSE A WAR RESULTING IN THE DEATHS OF
THOUSANDS OF INNOCENT IRAQI WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

--(AMERICANS) Q: ARE YOU ALLOWED TO DATE MEN AT ALL?
(EMIRATIS) A: NO, BUT SOME GIRLS BREAK THE RULES. IT
DEPENDS ON THE FAMILY. WE OR OUR FAMILIES PICK THE MAN
WE WILL MARRY. BUT MOST FAMILIES LET EACH GIRL DECIDE
AS LONG AS THEY DON'T OBJECT TO THE POTENTIAL HUSBAND.
WE OFTEN MARRY OUR COUSINS.

--(AMERICANS - REACTING TO THE PREVIOUS RESPONSE WITH A
LOUD 'EWE') Q: COUSINS? (EMIRATIS) A: YES. OUR
FAMILIES ARE VERY IMPORTANT. WE TRY TO MAINTAIN THEM.

--(AMERICANS) Q: AT WHAT AGE ARE YOU ALLOWED TO MAKE
YOUR OWN RULES AND DECISIONS? (EMIRATIS) A: WHEN WE
GET MARRIED, WE HAVE MORE FREEDOM TO MAKE OUR OWN
DECISIONS BUT ARE STILL BOUND TO OUR CULTURE AND FAMILY.

--(AMERICANS) Q: HOW MANY OF YOU WANT TO GET A JOB
AFTER YOU FINISH SCHOOL? (EMIRATIS) A: ALL OF US
(EXCEPT ONE - THIS STUDENT WANTED TO PURSUE GRADUATE

STUDY IN THE U.S., U.K., OR SWITZERLAND, WHERE HER FAMILY OWNS SEVERAL HOMES).

¶4. COMMENT: THE EMIRATIS' STATEMENTS ON IRAQ, AMERICAN CULTURE, EMPLOYMENT, AND POLITICS WERE VERY REVEALING OF EMIRATI SOCIETY, CONSIDERING THAT THE MAJORITY OF THEM COME FROM PROMINENT FAMILIES. EACH STUDENT INDICATED A DESIRE TO SEEK PUBLIC OR PRIVATE EMPLOYMENT, SOMETHING FAR MORE THAN THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF HOUSEWIFE AND MOTHER. THIS IS A REAL POSSIBILITY FOR MOST OF THE STUDENTS, AS SHEIKHA FATIMA, THE FAVORED WIFE OF UAE PRESIDENT SHEIKH ZAYED BIN SULTAN AL NAHYAN, AND OTHER PROMINENT EMIRATI WOMEN CONTINUE TO OPEN NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPORTANT POSITIONS FOR EMIRATI WOMEN IN THE UAE GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY. THE MOST INTERESTING POINT TO EMERGE FROM THE DISCUSSION IS HOW CLEARLY EMIRATI STUDENTS CONTINUE TO SEPARATE THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, CULTURE, AND 'AMERICANA,' FROM USG POLICIES.
END COMMENT.

WAHBA